

The Abolition of Landed Property

Memorandum for Robert Applegarth

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The property in the soil — that original source of all wealth — has become the great problem upon the solution of which depends the future of the working class.

While not intending to discuss here all the argument put forward by the advocates of private property in land — jurists, philosophers, and political economists — we shall only state firstly that they disguise the original fact of conquest under the cloak of "natural right". If conquest constitutes a natural right on the part of the few, the many have only to gather sufficient strength in order to acquire the natural right of reconquering what has been taken from them. In the progress of history, the conquerors attempt to give a sort of social sanction to their original title derived from brute force, through the instrumentality of laws imposed by themselves. At last comes the philosopher who declares those laws to imply the universal consent of society. If indeed private property in land is based upon such a universal consent, it evidently becomes extinct from the moment the majority of a society dissent from warranting it. However, leaving aside the so-called "rights" of property, we affirm that the economical development of society, the increase and concentration of people, the necessity to agriculture of collective and organized labor as well as of machinery and similar contrivances, render the nationalization of land a "social necessity", against which no amount of talk about the rights of property will avail.

Changes dictated by social necessity are sure to work their way sooner or later, because the imperative wants of society must be satisfied, and legislation will always be forced to adapt itself to them.

What we require is a daily increasing production whose exigencies cannot be met by allowing a few individuals to regulate it according to their whims and private interests or to ignorantly exhaust the powers of the soil. All modern methods such as irrigation, drainage, steam plowing, chemical treatment, etc., ought to be applied to agriculture at last. But the scientific knowledge we possess, and the technical means of agriculture we command, such as machinery, etc., can never be successfully applied but by cultivating the land on a large scale. Cultivation on a

large scale — even under its present capitalist form that degrades the producer himself to a mere beast of burden — has to show results so much superior to the small and piecemeal cultivation — would it then not, if applied on national dimension, be sure to give an immense impulse to production? The ever growing wants of the people on the one side, the ever increasing price of agricultural products on the other, afford the irrefutable proof that the nationalization of land has become a "social necessity". The diminution of agricultural produce springing from individual abuse ceases to be possible as soon as cultivation is carried on under the control, at the cost, and for the benefit of the nation.

France has often been alluded to, but with its peasantry proprietorship it is farther off the nationalization of land than England with its landlordism. In France, it is true, the soil is accessible to all who can buy it, but this very faculty has brought about the division of land into small plots cultivated by men with small means and mainly thrown on the resources of the bodily labor of both themselves and their families. This form of landed property and the piecemeal cultivation necessitated by it not only excludes all appliance of modern agricultural improvements, but simultaneously converts the tiller himself into the most decided enemy of all social progress, and above all, of the nationalization of the land. Enchained to the soil upon which he has to spend all his vital energies in order to get a relatively small return, bound to give away the greater part of his produce to the state in the form of taxes, to the law tribe in the form of judiciary costs, and to the usurer in the form of interest; utterly ignorant of the social movement outside his petty field of action; he still clings with frantic fondness to his spot of soil and his merely nominal proprietorship in the same. In this way, the French peasant has been thrown into a most fatal antagonism to the industrial working class. Peasantry proprietorship being thus the greatest obstacle to the "nationalization of land", France, in its present state, is certainly not the place where we must look for a solution of this great problem. To nationalize the land and let it out in small plots to individuals or workingmen's societies would, under a middle-class government, only bring about a reckless competition among them, and cause a certain increase of "rent", and thus lend new facilities to the appropriators for feeding upon the producers.

At the International Congress in Brussels, in 1868, one of my friends said:

"Small private property is doomed by the verdict of science; great private property by justice. There remains then but one alternative. The soil must become the property of rural associations, or the property of the whole nation. The future will decide the question."

I say, on the contrary:

"The future will decide that the land cannot be owned but nationally. To give up the soil to the hands of associated rural laborers would be to surrender all society to one exclusive class of producers. The nationalization of land will work a complete change in the relations between labor and capital and finally do away altogether with capitalist production, whether industrial or rural. Only then the class distinctions and privileges will disappear together with the economical basis from which they originate and society will be transformed into an association of 'producers'. To live upon other people's labor will become a thing of the past. There will no longer exist a government nor a state distinct from society itself."

Agriculture, mining, manufacture, in one word, all branches of production will gradually be organized in the most effective form. *National centralization of the means of production* will become the natural basis of a society composed of associations of free and equal producers consciously acting upon a common and rational plan. Such is the goal to which the great economic movement of the 19th century is tending.

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